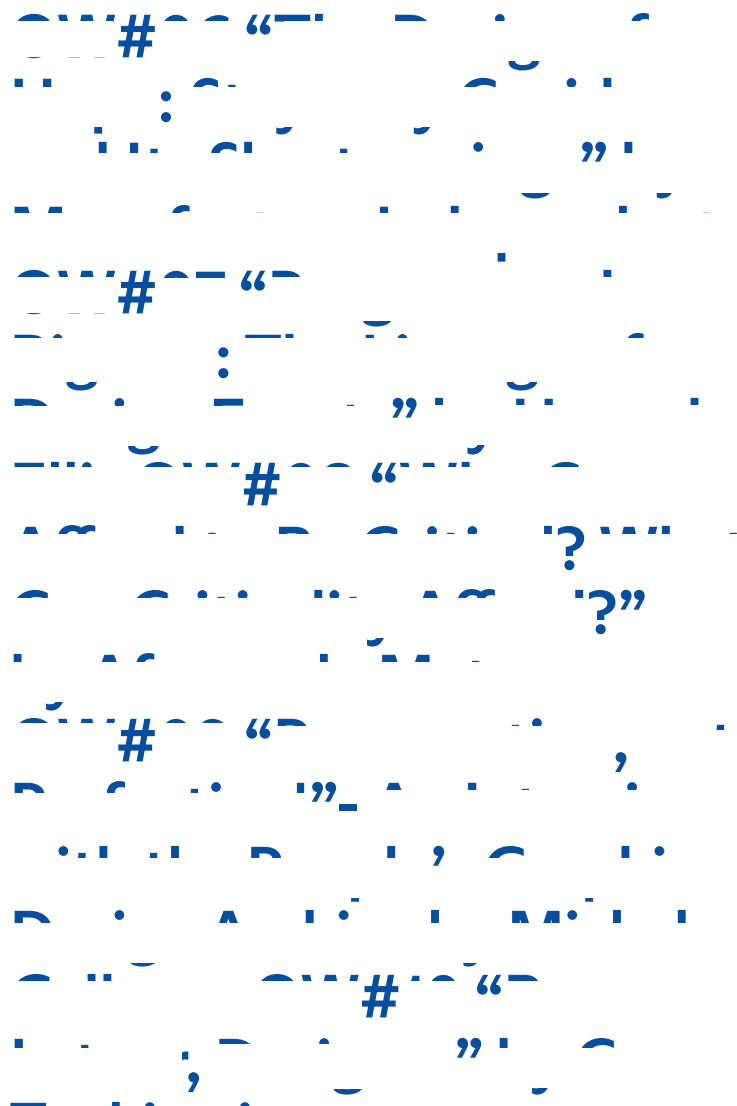




OTHER WORLDS BULLETIN II

#06 - #10

# OTHER WORLDS BULLETIN II

^`´`#06 ; ^`´`#07 ; ^`´`#08 ;  
^`´`#09 ; ^`´`#10

## Introduction

Other Worlds (OW) is a journal-as-newsletter for design research, criticism and transformation. OW aims at making the social, political, cultural and technical complexities surrounding design practices legible and, thus, mutable. What other worlds, exactly? Those that have been traditionally ignored, neglected or silenced in the past, as well as those that are overlooked today: non-Western communities negotiating their own set of values through practice, alternative rationalities overshadowed by the instrumental reason, technosocial environments blossoming at the periphery of platform empires, semi-visible modes of organization that oppose or sustain official institutions.

OW values design cultures, but approaches them without devotion. Instead of celebrating the power of design, it focuses on the power structures that, willingly or not, design reproduces. More than a solution, design itself is a problem and a challenge. OW acknowledges design's intrinsic interdisciplinarity, but we recognize that such quality is not neutral: design cultures have produced reductions and erasures. This is why at OW we humbly relate to other fields of knowledge doing our best to respect their histories and preexisting set of relationships.

Presently, design is not even a buzzword anymore. That might be a good thing. Opposing a generic understanding of design, OW engages instead with generalism, that is, the emancipatory principle according to which the life project of individual and collective subjects shouldn't be

the domain of designerly elites alone. Claiming autonomy is not enough: autonomy is a process that requires cultivation and maintenance.

OW hosts articles, interviews, short essays and all the cultural production that doesn't fit neither the fast-paced, volatile design media promotional machine nor the necessarily slow and lengthy process of scholarly publishing. This way, the hope is to address urgent issues, without sacrificing rigor and depth.

OW is maintained by the Center for Other Worlds (COW), at Lusófona University, Lisbon (PT). COW focuses on the development of perspectives that aren't dominant nor imposed by the design discipline, through criticism, speculation and collaboration with various disciplines such as curating, architecture, visual arts, ecology and political theory, having in design an unifying element but rejecting hierarchies between them.

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#06

2022, February 14

# “The Design of Hope: Stayaway Covid and Its Shortcomings” by Manufatura Independente

*In this issue of Other Worlds, Ana Isabel Carvalho and Ricardo Lafuente, founders of the F/LOSS-oriented design studio Manufatura Independente, rigorously dissect Stayaway, the contact tracing app launched in Portugal during the Covid pandemic. By analysing both the technical limitations of the app and its misleading visual metaphors, they prove that a grounded criticism of public health monitoring systems is possible. Reconsidering the app after its demise, they warn us against a novelty bias in the public discourse, which is too focused on promotion and expectations rather than consequences and effects.*



Riscos que para si foram invisíveis.

The persistence of the pandemic has motivated many proposals for digital solutions to fight Covid. Contact tracing apps are one of such endeavours: by measuring how close smartphones are and how long they stay so, their purpose is to warn people of potentially dangerous contacts with infected people. As part of our work in Portugal's digital rights association D3, we've dedicated a good amount of time to the analysis of the evolution and failure of Portugal's contact tracing app, Stay Away Covid. As a result, we published a lengthy public report highlighting the shortcomings of this experiment. In this brief text, we offer a design perspective into the app's interface and communication strategy, in order to outline the less evident pitfalls in rapidly deploying untested technologies as public health measures.

## Failure

Stayaway embodied the hope that we could develop an effective digital weapon to ward off the virus. The promise was enticing: an app to keep you safe without being visually or physically obtrusive. No barriers needed, no special equipment required. Expanding on the power of a device "we all have" (a common statement that conveniently overlooks social inequalities and minoritarian choices), we could be just an install away from safety.

However, when applied, this solution exhibited multiple shortcomings. Its dependence on Bluetooth for measuring distances – a purpose that the Bluetooth protocol was not designed for – eventually revealed significant inaccuracies. Many people are already familiar with these, as broken connections or frequent pairing problems with audio speakers are to this day still common. Even with perfect usage, detection might not happen: one “positive” phone centimeters away from a “negative” one might not trigger the activation of the latter, due to wildly varying environmental factors such as reflective wall materials or signal interference from other devices.

The use of the app was especially encouraged in crowded spaces and public transport, where transmission risk is high. Practical studies confirmed that many false positives and negatives were to be expected, particularly in the context of large crowds where detection accuracy drops to 10%. It was also discovered that the app became virtually ineffective inside large vehicles with metal frames such as trams and buses. Destined to fail in its most crucial usage scenarios, contact tracing apps were promoted as our only hope, reminding us of the Silicon Valley mantra Fake it till you make it.

At no point did the app’s proponents ever acknowledge that the detection method was, to be generous, not fully reliable. Public statements were made blaming doctors, users or the health ministry for the app’s failure to have any significant effect. The app itself, its creators insisted, had no issue and worked properly. At the same time, glossy TV ads and public transport posters appealed to the general public to install Stayaway, showcasing relieved citizens with floating shields around them.

**STAYAWAY**  
COVID





Official full-page ad for Stayaway Covid. It reads "The app which alerts if you were at risk of contagion. Take care of yourself. Take care of everyone." Source: [stayawaycovid.pt](https://stayawaycovid.pt).

## Floating Shields and Traffic Lights

The visual metaphor of the floating shields has clear implications for the app. It promises protection, when it could only provide detection. It proposes peace of mind, even though it can't reassure you that you're not infected – only that it didn't detect prolonged contact with an infected person. Both of these aspects of public communication point toward a projected optimism around the app's capabilities and potential to fight Covid. Besides its practical purpose, Stayaway also was presented (and thus appeared) as a concrete source of hope to end the pandemic; public communication followed: it emphasised this aspect of faith in a digital device that could present a true solution if only widely adopted. The reality is that most of these implicit promises were inflated to keep up the sentiment of hope in the app's effectiveness, which indirectly reinforced the perception of the government's preparedness.

Stayaway's user interface takes this encouraging view further, adopting the visual metaphor of traffic lights used to represent either a positive or negative status. There are only two possible states for the app (contact detected or not) with no context given to the user, no probability score, no warnings about signal instability, and very little useful advice on how to act on the reported results. When no contact has occurred, a reassuring message saying no contacts were detected is presented in the color green; in the case of detection, the user is brought to a yellow screen and urged to enact preventive measures.



Application screenshots for both “no contact detected” and “contact detected” states.  
Source: stayawaycovid.pt.

The use of yellow is appropriate: while it reassures the user that it's not reason for immediate alarm – hence the avoidance of the color red –, it conveys the feeling of a situation that warrants caution. The use of green, however, contributes to a false sense of security since it establishes a notion of safety, when the reality is that contact might have occurred without the app detecting it. By not mentioning this possibility and presenting a green light the app ended up misleading the Prime Minister himself, who publicly remarked “I use [Stayaway], and it is with great satisfaction that, every morning, I have verified that until today I have not been close to anyone that could be a contact risk”. Of course, Stayaway

can only report whether or not a contact was detected and cannot be read as a general assessment of your status, but the green light clearly encourages this legitimate (but dangerously wrong) interpretation.

It is significant that the app was mainly presented as a source of hope for society and not just as a public health device. This positioning was made concrete in its advertising, public messaging and UI design choices: Stayaway appears as something that can protect you and reassure you that things are okay, despite being able to guarantee neither. The privacy side-effects of employing a large-scale networked system as a response to the pandemic are also left out of the picture. It is then appropriate to ask what kind of social purpose does the misleadingly positive view of the app's capabilities bring. And, more generally, we should ask whether exaggerated optimism is a good strategy to ensure public trust, particularly when reality cannot deliver.

We can find examples of apps that are, by design, clear about their limitations. For example, menstrual cycle tracking apps provide the users an estimate of fertile and non-fertile periods. Since cycles aren't regular, such an app can never precisely state a yes/no result, but rather an approximation based on statistical data, an average value that the user can take into consideration but that isn't a definitive result. And even though contact tracing apps operate on the same nebulous area of averages and approximations, furthermore based on unrealistic premises – everyone should have the app installed, everyone should carry their phone at all times, perfect physical conditions are always ensured for Bluetooth signal to propagate –, they present the user with a clear-cut binary status.



Still from the official promo video of Stayaway Covid. Source: [stayawaycovid.pt](https://stayawaycovid.pt).

## Post-Mortem

[M]any new technologies and their products have entered the public sphere in a cloud of hope, imagination, and anticipation. In many cases these hopes were to begin with fictional, rather than real; even in the best of circumstances they were vastly exaggerated. Discussion focused largely on individuals, whether users or workers, and promised an easier life with liberation from toil and drudgery. Discourse never seemed to focus on the effects of the use of the same device by a large number of people, nor was there any focus on the organizational and industrial implications of the new technologies, other than in the vaguest of terms. – Ursula M. Franklin, *The Real World of Technology*

Contrary to the media attention given to the promotion of the app, there was no public “post-mortem”, no follow-up debate, no analysis of what happened after it became clear that Stayaway didn’t meet its goals. This was a lost chance to further public discourse about the advantages and shortcomings of public health measures

mediated by apps. The later introduction of digital vaccination certificates worldwide makes it clear that the solutionist doctrine has firmly made its way into our public health infrastructure.

The interface and communication details outlined above hint towards a design approach that is focused on projecting a sense of safety and control that these apps cannot meet in reality. The feeling of hope is treated as something that can be managed and furthered by the use of projected positive attitudes that disregard any minimum expectations for the app (“if it saved a life, it was worth it”), while dismissing any possible side-effects of the app’s workings and limitations, such as the wasteful stress inflicted to someone who self-isolates in response to a false positive. In the end, the general goal wasn’t so much to make an app that works, but to spread the belief that it does, even when it doesn’t. The realisation that this misleading discourse (even if well-intentioned) is the official line of public health policy warrants a debate on the role of novel shiny tech solutions in regards to the challenges society faces.



Still from the official promo video of Stayaway Covid. Source: [stayawaycovid.pt](http://stayawaycovid.pt).

Ultimately, these are design choices about how public health practice and policy are formulated. And even if designers haven’t had a seat at the table yet, it’s not late to join the discussion about the design of digital health solutions. Design discourse ought to play a role in the critique of these solutionist approaches, applying its own specialised lens to the understanding of the fine workings and the nuanced effects of digital pandemic response solutions.



Calls still abound for “design thinking” hackathons focusing on novel concepts to fight Covid. We hear much less engagement with the actual design concepts that are being employed at scale, conceived (and designed) solely by technocratic task-forces and technical specialists – the concern voiced by the Institute for Technology in the Public Interest was a notable exception to this near silence. The solutionist wave has cast aside any field of study that is not mainly technical, like social sciences or concept design. If we don’t press for their seat at the table, it’s likely that they won’t earn it back in the face of an all-encompassing, technoaccelerationist app-based agenda.

#07

2022, April 25

# “Progress and Bigness: The Lineage of Design Events” by Hannah Ellis

*In her book *The Circuit*, graphic design writer, researcher and educator Hannah Ellis investigates the actual meaning of design when it reaches the scale of fairs, festivals and biennials, as well as the effects of these events on people and places. Here, we publish, with permission of the author, a short excerpt about the political and economic genealogy of these manifestations. *The Circuit* is the first title in the 'Design Capital' series, edited by Francisco Laranjo, Luiza Prado and Silvio Lorusso.*



Common sense suggests that 'design events' are obviously and exclusively about design. But a more complex conclusion of what they do or are or how they exist in the world is slightly harder to pin down. They are slippery things, tricky to articulate precisely because of the fundamentals we take for granted, and subject to unofficial precursors — like 'promotional' — that change their meaning entirely.

'Events' is too big a category to file under, a cluttering of festivals and weeks and biennials, piling together the exhibitions that take over a city for days, weeks, sometimes months. Flags are planted overnight and lay claim to a place that has been conquered by design. From the outside, beyond the length of time that they stretch out and over a city for, they behave largely in the same way, or at least appear to. Differentiation requires a bit of etymological digging: take, for example, the meaning of 'festival' — a day or period of celebration, usually religious. For the most part, design festivals are annual, celebrating the subject with Gregorian predictability, much like the dedicated Weeks that block out one fifty-second of the industry calendar. Language puts 'design' next to deities and, traced back far enough, 'festival' can be followed through iterations of Old French and Latin — festivalis, festivus — to the root of festa, for feast.

A day of dedication or a celebratory meal; in this case, what is gorged upon is not good food and wine, but an overabundance of design with the capital D. (They should not, I realise later on, be confused as moments for close examination or interrogation; further backwards still, festa is one step removed from festus – joyous.)



Iconic interior view of the transept of the Crystal Palace, showing the size and scale of the building and the Great Exhibition. (The Transept, Dickinson's Comprehensive Pictures of the Great Exhibition of 1851, from the originals painted for Prince Albert, by Messrs. Nash, Haghe and Roberts.)

Design biennials (biennales, if you're committed to the Italian) are more complicated still. As both an adjective and a noun, 'biennial' starts with botany: a plant with a lifecycle – from seed, through growth and flowering, to eventual expiration – of two years. First used in Ancient Greece to determine two-yearly plants from those that were one-yearly or others that seemed to regenerate forever, it was not until the 17th century that the word was used to mean anything that occurred one year, and skipped the next. It was much later, in the mid-1900s, after Venice, that it was used to define syncopated events: usually a large scale art exhibition presented for and towards an international audience.



This image and the following ones: illustrations showing the critically different ways that exhibitions from Italy, America, Turkey, India and the Bahamas and Trinidad (titled 'Colonial Produce' by the artist) were curated and presented to the public during the Great Exhibition. (Italian Court from the Nave, Dickinson's Comprehensive Pictures of the Great Exhibition of 1851, from the originals painted for Prince Albert, by Messrs. Nash, Haghe and Roberts.)

Design enters somewhere in between these two dates, as the lineage of festivals and biennials and other similar events overlap. Mid-way through the Industrial Revolution, early design events that shared the international ambitions of contemporary biennials – expositions (exponere: expose, publish, explain) and world fairs (Middle English<sup>1</sup>: a periodic gathering for the sale of goods, later an exhibition to promote particular products) – emerged as countries competed to be seen. By this time, ideas of joyous dedication or celebration at smaller scales had already been replaced by competitive largeness. Promotion was central to these early events. In 1844, the Exposition des Produits de l'Industrie Française, widely thought of as the first international 'design event', had gained a reputation for bringing together feats of manufacturing that escaped France's country borders.

1. 'Fair' is also derived from the Latin *feriae* – holy days on which fairs were held – neatly tying commodities and production right back up with worship.



For half a century, the event had increased in size, starting as a protectionist attempt to shield French manufacturers from economic damage caused by cheaper English products. Early versions of the Exposition had been small, and stalls were set out with French-made products for visitors to buy. Browsing, it turned out, was more popular though – both with the general public and with makers themselves – a realisation that was quickly picked up on by officials and turned into strategy. In 1834, the President of the Société Royale d'Émulation, Jacques Boucher de Perthes, spoke of the benefits that came out of peer-assessment, saying: 'It is here that the producer brings the fruit of his labour side by side with that of his neighbour – takes the measure of his efforts, estimates the merits of his productions ... exhibitions are better than prohibitions, which tend to separate men and isolate them.' (Greenhalgh, 1988, p. 10) French makers, so the theory went, would be encouraged to continue to improve their work, cycling between display, constructive nosiness, and a desire for self-betterment.



America, Dickinson's Comprehensive Pictures of the Great Exhibition of 1851, from the originals painted for Prince Albert, by Messrs. Nash, Haghe and Roberts.

It was through repetition, though, the two or more yearly cycles of growth and improvement, that the promotional value outgrew that of design itself. By its tenth iteration in 1844, the Exposition, publishing outwards, had become something else entirely – both in intent and scale. Catalogues that documented previous events had caught attentions across Europe. Stalls were replaced by a temporary building on the Champs-Élysées that was purpose-built for the two month exhibition. Almost 4,000 items were on display: from Fine and Decorative Arts, to ‘machines to drill the ground for water, to transform sea-water into fresh water, to heat rooms, and improved devices for electroplating with gold or silver.’ (Burat, cited in Daniels, 2013, p. 5) For a while, Paris was the centre-point crossing of industrial production and pageantry. As a city, it could command attention. It was seen to be capable of changing the world.



Turkey No 2, Dickinson's Comprehensive Pictures of the Great Exhibition of 1851, from the originals painted for Prince Albert, by Messrs. Nash, Haghe and Roberts.

Happening at a time of imperial power struggles, the Exposition quickly inspired competitors. Britain, never to appear outdone, held the Great Exhibition shortly afterwards in 1851, in the purpose-built Crystal Palace. Without precedents to refer back to, early events had to ‘invent a way of

showing manufactured objects so as to render them meaningful beyond themselves.' (Greenhalgh, 1988, p. 3) Entertainment, spectacle and pageantry became integral elements of display. The size of a small city itself, covering nineteen acres of ground, the Crystal Palace was built over and around the mature trees of Hyde Park that stood in its way. (Later, I read that the displays inside were ten miles long, and ache at the thought.) Overseen by Prince Albert, thirty-four nations, some 15,000 individual exhibitors, took part in the one-off event.



India No 1, Dickinson's Comprehensive Pictures of the Great Exhibition of 1851, from the originals painted for Prince Albert, by Messrs. Nash, Haghe and Roberts.

Architecture was used metaphorically. If the Paris expositions had advocated for industrially-driven progress, the Great Exhibition stood for bigness and dominion. As much as anything else, the Exhibition acted as a show of importing ability. Writing in *Ephemeral Vistas*, historian and curator Paul Greenhalgh notes that 'despite a quasi-educational slant, the overall attitude and feeling was one of stocktaking, of an accountant's inventory of a company's possessions.' (1988, p. 54)



Of the thousands of objects on show to the public, half were examples of products of Britain and the countries that it had forced into subjugation.<sup>2</sup> On display were raw materials, commodities, fine art pieces, and manufacturing processes: printing presses that worked and demystified production to a public audience; the 105.6 carats of the Koh-i-Noor diamond; tapestries and textiles; steam-powered trains; cotton was refined and spun and woven in front of visitors' eyes. Empire, he continues, was seen as 'a commodity, a thing more important than but not dissimilar to shawls, ironwork, flax, or indeed, sculpture... This point was reinforced by the way the countries within the empire were exhibited, as quantifiable batches of produce rather than as cultures.'

Whilst histories and cultures that had been interrupted, flattened, or erased entirely by colonisation were objectified and reduced into one inside the Crystal Palace, the imbalance of power would see the inverse happen across Europe. Countries were opened up. Railways had cut lines across the continent; new cartographies formed around them.

Many people would later point to the Exhibition, converging as it did with a quickly democratising and cheapening transport infrastructure, as the beginning of cultural tourism on a massive scale.

Over the course of five-and-a-half months, six million people visited The Exhibition — because they could. A requirement of the event was that it would be self-financing, and entry to visitors was ticketed. It broke even, and then some. In total, the Exhibition made a profit of £186,000 (which, adjusted for inflation, works out at somewhere between £18–26 million today) (Picard, 2009) and the surplus was folded back into the surrounding area, funding London's museum district, the straight line stretch from South Kensington tube station to Hyde Park colloquially known as Albertopolis.

2. Ibid. p. 53. Greenhalgh notes the extremity of domination at the time: 'The produce of every possession that could be economically transported was to be there... the East Indies, Indian Archipelago, Jersey, Guernsey, Ceylon [now Sri Lanka], Ionian Islands, Malta, Cape of Good Hope, Natal, West Coast of Africa, Canada, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, New Brunswick, St. Helena, Mauritius, the Seychelles, St. Domingo, Grenada, Montserrat, St. Kitt's, Barbados, Antigua, British Guiana [now Guyana], the Bahamas, Trinidad, the Bermudas, South Australia, Western Australia, New Zealand, New South Wales, Van Diemen's Land [now Tasmania], Labuan and Borneo.'



Greenhalgh, P. (1988). *Ephemeral Vistas: The "Expositions Universelles," Great Exhibitions and World's Fairs, 1851–1939*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Picard, L. (2009, October 14). The Great Exhibition. Retrieved from British Library: <https://www.bl.uk/victorian-britain/articles/the-great-exhibition>.

#08

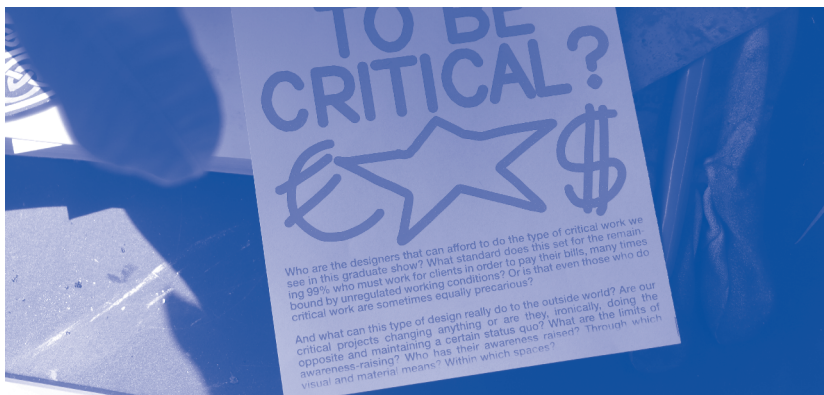
2022, June 13

# “Who Can Afford to Be Critical? What Can Criticality Afford?”

## by Afonso de Matos

*In this issue of Other Worlds, Netherlands-based Portuguese designer and researcher Afonso de Matos looks back at his educational journey which led him from having no idea about design to believing that everything is design and design is everything. This journey urged de Matos to come to terms with a series of contradictions about the role of a critical attitude in design, its effects on the world and its relation to uneven professional opportunities.*





Among a small but significant number of design institutions (mostly located in Europe, the US and the UK), a certain outlook upon the field has been taking shape. It has been given many names, but here we'll call it "Critical Design." This outlook perceives design as more than a market service: it aims to show that designers can be agents of powerful social and political change, beyond the boundaries of the commercial client-commission setting. From this perspective, designers are no longer meant to solve problems, but rather frame them. We are asked to shoulder the responsibility of raising awareness about the world's issues. We are encouraged to become provocateurs.

These apparently productive developments beg, however, some further investigation. Who can afford to do this type of critical work? What standard does it set for the remaining 99% of designers who must work for clients in order to pay their bills, many times bound to unregulated working conditions? Or is that even those who do critical work are sometimes equally precarious? And that's not all. Beyond asking what the criticality discourse does to us, designers, we must also ask: what can it really do to the world? Are our critical projects changing anything or are they, ironically, doing the opposite and keeping the status quo? What are the limits of awareness-raising? Whose awareness is actually raised? By which visual and material means, and within which spaces?

My thesis, developed at Design Academy Eindhoven between 2021 and 2022, entitled *Who Can Afford to Be Critical? What Can Criticality Afford?* aims to understand what political power contemporary designers hold and question this very understanding. Instead of focusing on individual critical practices that can quickly fall into echo chambers, should we rather try to look for political agency in other capacities? Maybe not as designers, but as workers, as citizens, as activists... simply, as people?



First of the t-shirts commenting on the critical design discourse and its clichés are to be worn by some DAE graduates as they present in the Graduate Show of Dutch Design Week, in October 2022.

## Circling Around the Critical

I enrolled in a Communication Design bachelor program blindly. I had never heard of it. I had been treading through an oppressing, rigid path in the STEMs field for the past three years of high school, and the escape that a so-called “creative” field posed was alluring. I had no idea what graphic designers did – even though I dealt with and consumed objects designed by them daily.

When I was 17, in my final year of high school, I underwent a vocational assessment – one of those intensive tests where, at the end, you are told what it is that you do best and show more enjoyment doing. My top scores leaned more to the arts and humanities, instead of the sciences. It only confirmed something I already suspected: I should change my path. But where to? The psychologist who interpreted the results for me whispered a suggestion: “You know a degree which combines the visual arts and reading, writing and communicating? It’s called Communication Design, and there’s a nice faculty where they teach it here in Lisbon.” I was dumbfounded. I had never considered the existence of such a thing. He asked “Do you know what it is that communication designers do?” The only thing that came to my mind: “Hm... those billboards you see on the highway?”

Even though I started my bachelors having almost no clue of what graphic or communication design was, I finished it thinking that design was everything, everywhere. From the nowhere of invisibility to the nowhere of omnipresence, design’s culture seems to stride between these non-places. It behaves like a force that is barely recognized by most people even though it shapes their lives. This cognitive dissonance is ubiquitous within the field, with designers claiming that “everything is design” and “everyone can be a designer” while at the same time trying to protect their profession from the gig economy, from platforms where you can order a poster online for 5 euros, from the menace of technological automation and from amateurs – those with no professional training who can become equally as good as formally trained designers, given the ubiquity of online tools, tutorials and software.





Fanzines resulted from a series of meetings organized in DAE between February and May 2022, where students discussed how matters of finance, class and precariousness limit or enable how “critical” one can be through design itself. The four themes are: the reality of work beyond school; the power of design and the agency of designers; the labor and class position of designers, and the possibilities for designers to build collective power. The image displays three work in progress iterations.

At my bachelors, me and my colleagues benefited from quite experimental studio courses throughout the three years, where we could explore mediums such as sound, photography, video and installation art, while simultaneously having theoretical courses that aided conceptual thinking. We would both produce and design our content, content which would very often address various social, political and cultural issues. These social concerns were always present and we were encouraged to pursue them in our works, many times disregarding ideas of “good form” or “good design” in favor of a more thorough conceptual research, in favor of a pertinent message. This pleased me, given that I was quite passionate about activism – and silly young me thought that reading some theory and then doing a critical design piece addressing a social issue equated activism. When I learned that in this expanded view of design there was also a place for those urgencies, it felt like unearthing a treasure. I really loved my bachelors because of this. I could engage with politics, I could be critical!

Thinking in retrospect, the Communication Design programme, like many other European design programmes, seems to lean towards the third mode of criticality that Ramia Mazé ascribes to design practice in her contribution for the publication *The Reader* (2009)<sup>1</sup>. In the text, Mazé proposes three different modes of criticality within design.

1. Included in the *lapis Forum for Design and Critical Practice*, which also gave rise to the exhibition *Forms of Inquiry* (2007) at London’s Architectural Association.



The first is an individual designer's criticism towards their own personal practice. The second relates to criticism towards design in general, to its methods, culture, frameworks and dogmas.

Then, the third mode relates to the cases in which design addresses urgent social and political issues. Here, in contrast to the previous modes, design itself isn't so much the object of criticism as it is the vector through which this criticism is directed elsewhere. We can witness this framework at play in a whole gamut of recent approaches, sporting names like Social Design, Speculative Design, Design Activism, Design Fiction, Contextual Design, all of which could vaguely fit under the umbrella of this third modality.

A similar formulation to Mazé's definition can be found when Els Kuijpers talks about productivism, in her proposal for a spectrum of strategies within communication design.[kuijpers] Kuijpers puts forward a set of five nomenclatures – functionalism, formalism, informalism, productivism and dialogism – which she argues are not "meant as a historical classification of styles with distinguished ideological positions but as a flexible scale in which the designer constantly shifts – depending on the circumstances." Productivism, according to Kuijpers, "puts communication design at the service of a social programme aimed at bringing about change in society."



Second t-shirt from the series that will be presented during the Graduate Show of Dutch Design Week in October 2022.

The research object of my thesis (or at least its starting point) is defined along these lines, and I will simply call it Critical Design.<sup>2</sup> This name serves as a container for all those approaches that – following Kuijpers’ and Mazé’s definitions – aim to use design as a vector for social critique and social change, and see the designer as a political actor.

Under this banner I could include many instances, for example, most of the projects produced within schools such as the Design Academy Eindhoven or the Sandberg Instituut’s Design Department (as well as their pedagogical ethos)[schools]; design studios such as The Rodina or Dunne & Raby; events like the Forms of Inquiry exhibition or the Istanbul Design Biennales; publications like Keller Easterling’s Medium Design; or micro-polemics such as the ones that stemmed from the Republic of Salvation project at MoMA’s Design and Violence exhibition.



Third t-shirt from the series that will be presented during the Graduate Show of Dutch Design Week in October 2022.

All the instances mentioned above have in common a view of design as an emancipated discipline which is capable of doing something beyond its commercial boundaries, and they perceive designers themselves as the stewards of progressive change. They share the common trait of trying to exit the usual model of design as a service, veering away from

2. Critical Design was coined by product design duo Dunne and Raby in the late 90s. They define it as follows: “Critical Design uses speculative design proposals to challenge narrow assumptions, preconceptions and givens about the role products play in everyday life. (...) It is more of an attitude than anything else, a position rather than a method.” In this text, the usage of Critical Design will encompass this definition but also Mazé’s and Kuijpers’ contributions to defining this critical shift we’re witnessing within design discourse.

the demands of the market in search of a greater social good. They stem from research programmes, from funds and grants, from positions within academia – either as student, tutor or researcher – or just as the result of an “independent” practice (as in, independent from clients). However, these approaches do not necessarily circulate outside the market, but instead on an exclusive market of their own. In their eager criticism of the workings of the outside world, these projects often forget to examine what are the socio-economic conditions that enable their own existence in the first place – that enable the existence of such a thing as Critical Design. Where do these projects circulate? What makes them circulate in certain spaces but not others? What kind of audience do they attract? How are they financed? Who gets to engage with them? What does that engagement lead to? Does it lead to anything?

## What It Does to Us and What It Does to the World

I finished my bachelors with a “Speculative Design” project: a fiction that proposed an alternative reality where humanity had evolved to become a collective hivemind. This was a group project, done with my friends Inês Pinheiro and Vítor Serra. As our degree came to a close, the anxieties started to pile up. As proud as we were of our project, when we looked at the maximalist aesthetics, cloudy lyrical language and the installation art medium it employed, we couldn’t help but pose two simple but grave questions to ourselves: “what can something like this really do to the world?” and “how can someone make a living doing projects like this?” Still, today, I believe the essence of these questions – as simplistic and naive as they were – is one worth pursuing. I believe it’s within these two questions that we can find the two barriers Critical Design faces: on one hand, the relevance that it can have to society and on the other hand, the feasibility of its practice for each designer, in such a precarious field. By reworking those two questions a bit, I arrived at these interrogations: Who can afford to be critical? And what can criticality afford?



Page from the fanzine n. 2, entitled "I tried to subvert capitalism with my design practice. Now I'm looking for a job.", which discusses what power and responsibility designers hold today.

Asking two questions allows for a dual analysis. The first interrogation highlights matters of privilege: why is Critical Design exclusive to a minority of designers who can conduct self-initiated, independent, critical projects, while the great majority of the profession doesn't have the choice to do so, as they depend on a client, company or agency who pays for their labour? The second question focuses on the impact that critical discourses on design have upon the real world, outside of the profession – and on the very origin of the urge to have an impact on the world. Does Critical Design exist because designers want to use their skills to enact progressive social and political change? Or are there other historical contingencies that can explain this almost philanthropic drive? Is there a hidden (or better, subconscious) agenda?

At this point, it becomes clear that the age-old concern regarding what we can do to the world as designers is what fuels my research. If we can do something, will it be through Critical Design projects that target social and political issues? Or will it be through a different way of being critical, maybe one more aligned with Mazé's first and second modes, where

criticality is directed towards design itself, in the hope that by reflecting on design's own mechanisms we might understand how they already impact the world? In other words, can one craft a critical practice of design, which is different from Critical Design? Would such a critical practice limit our agency even more? What is the relation between design's power and the designer's agency? What if instead of discussing how to impact society with our designs, we discussed first how we can impact our own world – our own field, one teeming with competition, precariousness and professional insecurity (of which Critical Design itself might be a symptom)?

Kuijpers, E. (2016). *Style? Strategy! On Communication Design as Meaning Production* in Laranjo, F. (2017). *Modes of Criticism 3 — Design and Democracy*. Eindhoven: Onomatopoe. pp. 19.

I could include others such as RCA's former master programme Design Interactions; UAL's MA Graphic Media Design; Yale School of Art's Graphic Design MFA; KASK's Autonomous Design BA + MA; etc.

— · · · #09

2022, October 18

# “Preservation, not Perfection!” - An Interview with the People’s Graphic Design Archive by Michele Galluzzo

*In this issue of Other Worlds, designer and design historian Michele Galluzzo speaks with Brockett Horne and Briar Levit, co-founders of the People's Graphic Design Archive, about messy history, bottom-up participation, institutional support and the awe that archival material can spark.*

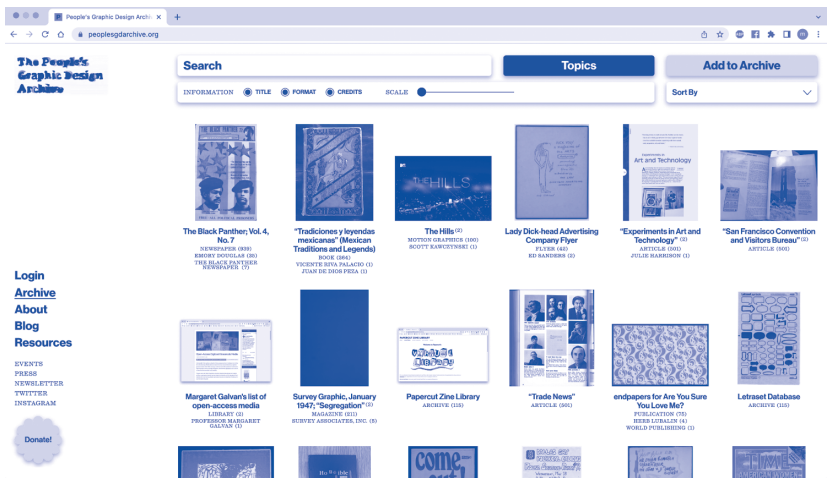


Local sign painting in Dominican Republic, Mural, PGDA – Added by Louise Sandhaus. <https://peoplesgdarchive.org/item/5399/local-sign-painting-in-dominican-republic>.

In 1994, Martha Scotford introduced the adjective 'messy' to define a novel approach to the historical narrative of graphic design. With her seminal essay *Messy History vs. Neat History*, published in the U.S. journal "Visible Language", the American historian proposed to shed light on the contribution of women to the evolution of visual communication. In order to have a more inclusive, anti-heroic and anti-canonical history – Scotford argued – it was necessary to adopt a 'messy' perspective on historical events, one capable of embracing a 'bottom-up' gaze, through the lens of social history or, in other words, people's history.

Nearly thirty years after Scotford's article, the desire to multiply historical narratives led to the creation of the People's Graphic Design Archive (PGDA). Founded in 2020 by Brockett Horne, Briar Levit, Louise Sandhaus, and Morgan Searcy, the PGDA is an online archive focused on recognizing and preserving "graphic design's and culture's expansive and inclusive history" through "a virtual archive built by everyone, about everyone, for everyone."





PGDA homepage, 13 October 2022. <https://peoplesgdarchive.org/>.

Increasingly, institutions, corporations, museums and well-known designers are investing in the creation of digital archives for the dissemination of historically valuable design artefacts. By opening their archives, these subjects inevitably promote their own point of view, which often corresponds to that of their clients, designers and promoters. Such a point of view is thus canonically positioned from 'above'.

Unlike these examples, PGDA offers internet users the possibility of not only being observers but also contributors so as to self-determine the history told. The PGDA is a participatory archive with the aim of challenging the canonical narrative and shaping the history of graphic design from "below" in a plural, collective and intersectional way. An archive that starts from the bottom hopefully gives rise to histories from below.



John and James Whitney, Five Film Exercises (Film 1-4), Experimental Film, 1943-44, PGDA – Added by Louise Sandhaus.  
<https://peoplesgdarchive.org/item/2749/five-film-exercises-film-1-4>.

Looking at the PGDA, it seems that the adjective "messy", suggested by Scotford in the mid-1990s, is still relevant, particularly in the motto adopted by the curators: "Preservation, not perfection!" Whereas Scotford contrasted "messy" with "neat", the PGDA favours "preservation" over the clinical and scientific "perfection" of canonical archives. Emphasising preservation means encouraging the submission of the widest amount of artefacts. Here, priorities are inverted: the PGDA fosters the mass participation from below and a plural representation of the world of graphic design from its inception until more recent years. Welcoming a broad participation which includes minorities that have so far been underrepresented, the archive challenges the methods hitherto used by historical archiving. For example, the PGDA critically reflects upon the boundaries produced by the very concept of the professional.

The words of Horne and Levit passionately delineate the PGDA's vision, along with unexpected and amusing confessions – a perfect embodiment of the alternative vision of history that Scotford hoped for in 1994: "It is complex, it is undefined, it is messy, but the rewards will be great."

**Michele Galluzzo:** The PGDA is driven by a participatory strategy open to a broad public. It adopts a crowdsourcing model that, as recently stated by curator and historian Andrew Satake Blauvelt, "dismantles traditional gatekeeping, throwing open the doors about [...] who is included,

and what counts as historically significant.” In doing so, the project seems to lay the foundations for a “people’s history.” But who are “the people”? In other words, who are, to date, the contributors to the PGDA? Who would you like to see participating? How do you plan to achieve greater user engagement on a global scale?



Faith Ringgold, All Power to the People, Poster, 1970, PGDA – Added by Louise Sandhaus.  
<https://peoplesgdarchive.org/item/4165/all-power-to-the-people-1>.

**Brockett Horne:** Contributors to the archive represent an amazing community of folks who care about Graphic Design history – makers, scholars, collectors, students, educators. We want better tools for archiving that don’t rely on those with expensive education, access to specialised tools, or isolated geographically. Since the launch of our new website, we’ve seen such a diverse array of contributors from all over the globe.

Three initiatives are underway to encourage even more participation from broader audiences: events (in person and remote), optimization for adding items from mobile devices, and active social media projects, including sharing items from the archive, resources on using it, and sharing profiles

of the people who contribute. For example, we have recently hosted two in-person roadshow events in California and have two upcoming Add-a-thon events focused on LatinX design (led by educator and designer Ramon Tejada) and Native Design.

**MG:** In the video presentation of the project, you claim to be addressing an audience of users and contributors specifically composed of design students, design educators, practising designers and design scholars. Given this closeness with the world of design, do you envision the risk that the images collected will end up privileging the designer's point of view rather than the one of the end user?

**BH:** We made that video three years ago and it has served us well. Archive contributors, so far, appear to be makers, thinkers, scholars – not only design practitioners. One goal of the project is to expand the definition of design. One way we are doing that is use the word “creator” to identify who makes a work of design. That could be a designer, but also a client, publisher, letterer, calligrapher, illustrator, or other role. We are wary of a Design History that privileges the designer alone as a hero and instead see the design space as collaborative.

**Briar Levit:** End users are “The People” and those people can upload, browse, comment, etc. The people who come to The People’s Graphic Design Archive can participate from all angles, so it will be interesting to see what is uploaded and what is particularly popular to upload. So far, a pattern hasn’t yet emerged.



Malcolm X with Levy's Ad, Photo, PGDA – Added by Briar Levit.

**MG:** As already mentioned, through a plural, participatory and intersectional archive, you aim to have a less canonical history. This is a precise curatorial choice in itself. What stakes have you set for yourself? Which submissions wouldn't you like to find in the PGDA? Can you already provide examples of rejected submissions?

**BH:** I'm not aware that we have rejected anything that meets our upload criteria. The site is moderated for things like hate speech. We are grateful for our site moderators and community guidelines that help identify factual errors, bring to life controversial topics, or harmful design.

We are delighted to see so many works by women, People of Colour, Indigenous and Native designers, and other marginalised voices. The co-directors are also encouraging new uploads in these areas, too, through our own research or to boost the amazing array of scholars who are working in these areas. And, we need MORE. Please share your gems.

**BL:** While we encourage people to upload histories that help expand the canon and our understanding of how graphic design supports our societies, we in no way reject works that are a part of the existing group of well recognized designers. That is because The People decide what goes in the archive. If someone wants to upload a piece by Paul Rand, they may do that.

There is a brief set of community guidelines that must be followed, and if an uploaded work seem to be a fine art piece, we may ask for the description to include context as to how this fits into a graphic design history repository.



Paul Rand, Earth Day '95, Poster, 1995,  
PGDA – Added by an unknown contributor.  
<https://peoplesgdarchive.org/item/3041/poster-earth-day-95-1995>.

**MG:** On the PGDA website, people are invited to upload historical items of graphic design that are at least ten years old. How was the threshold of a decade chosen for the inclusion of works? Aren't you afraid that studios will turn the archive into a promotional tool by uploading their work en masse?

**BH:** The “ten year” rule is fairly common among many museums and archives. The logic is that enough time has passed to bring a critical eye to history. However, it is problematic that this excludes some VERY important movements, such as Black Lives Matter, #metoo, Land Back, and even Occupy. We have bulging folders of items called “future history” that we anxiously await to upload. And we talk about this problem with our community to understand how valuable it is.



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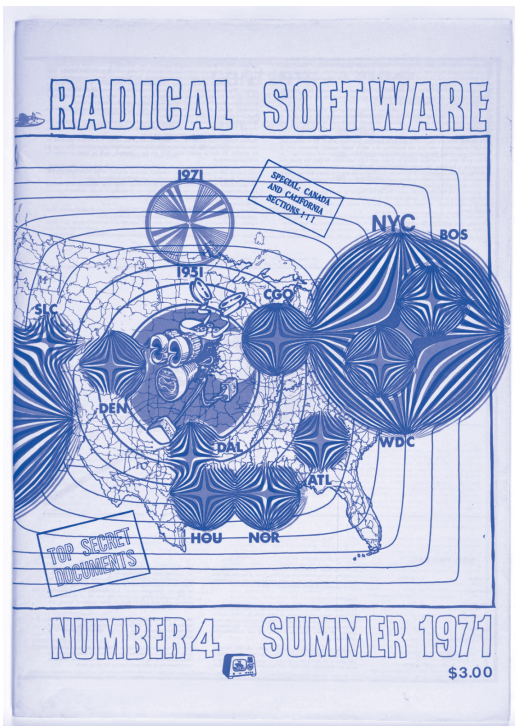
**MG:** The archive includes names, strands, nations and experiences that are as yet little researched in the history of graphic design. However, the majority of these artefacts collected to date appear to be out of context, sometimes lacking information on scale or captions that would allow a better understanding of their dissemination, how they were used or the audiences they were aimed at, and the environments in which they were experienced. Is this an issue for you? Who and how is the context created? Is this one of the tasks of the archive?

**BH:** The best uploads include context from the contributor! Our motto is “preservation, not perfection” and we call on the community to share more context and information for items. As the site and community builds, we are hoping for more dialogue and discussion.

**BL:** Adding to what Brockett said, we have already had folks add credits information via comments. In my own experience adding pieces to [FontsinUse.com](https://fontsinuse.com/), the community can become very active and invested. I uploaded a sign for an ice, coal, and wood business. I could gather some understanding of the business by reading the sign, but I wasn’t sure how it was meant to be hung. Commenters not only helped clarify that, but the grandson of the man who owned the business found the post and added more context! This was pretty thrilling. We hope to see this kind of community built with the PGDA.

**MG:** What are the long-term preservation strategies of the project? From which funds is it supported? What would happen if the funds and energy ran out?

**BH:** Currently, we are so lucky to have funding from private foundations and granting agencies. Since we have joined the Letterform Archive’s Digital Collective, the long-term success of PGDA is ensured – more stable than what an independent group of academics could secure alone.



Ant Farm, Chip Lord, Curtis Schreier, Cover design for Radical Software Magazine, Magazine, 1971, PGDA – Added by an unknown contributor. <https://peoplesgdarchive.org/item/4027/cover-design-for-radical-software-magazine-summer>.

**MG:** Until recently, there were no memes included in the PGDA – and perhaps in few or none of the graphic design histories written so far. This highlights the potential of an archive to display artefacts barely associated with the field and often not created by designers themselves. Do you think this can help us better define the current boundaries of graphic design?

**BH:** This sounds like a great idea! The question above shows exactly the type of scholarship, research, or inquiry that we hope the project will inspire.



north texas state university lab band  
leon breeden, director

Paul Souza, NTSU Lab 71 Album Cover, Album Art, Texas 1971, PGDA – Added by Bruce Deck.  
<https://peoplesgdarchive.org/item/5463/ntsu-lab-71-album-cover>.

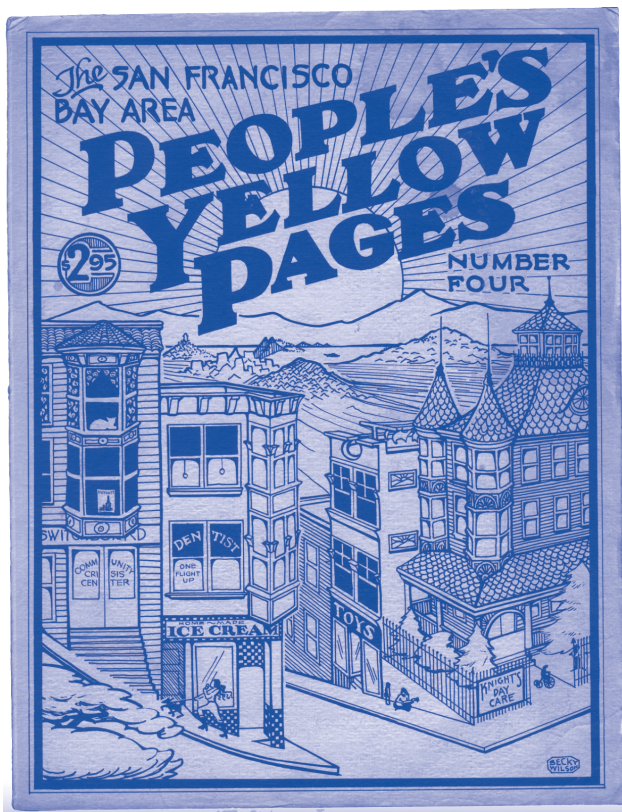
**MG:** Is there an item to which you are particularly fond of and which you consider representative of the spirit of the archive?

**BH:** My favourite is when items in the archive are in dialogue with each other. Check out these ramen noodle packages, one in Japanese and one in Korean!



Instant Ramen, Packaging, Japan 1958, PGDA – Added by an unknown contributor. <https://peoplesgdarchive.org/item/440/instant-ramen-packaging>. Samyang Ramyeon, Packaging, South Korea 1960s, PGDA – Added by an unknown contributor. <https://peoplesgdarchive.org/item/1741/packaging-for-samyang-ramyeon-instant-ramen>.

**BL:** This is a really tough question – especially since our custom platform went live and we get a random selection of items on the home page a few times everyday and I see new things all the time! I’m feeling a lot of love for the home of my youth in Northern California, so this San Francisco Bay Area People’s Yellow Pages is one I love right now.



Becky Wilson, The San Francisco Bay Area People's Yellow Pages No. 4, Finished work, San Francisco 1975, PGDA – Added by Stephen Coles.  
<https://peoplesgdarchive.org/item/771/the-san-francisco-bay-area-peoples-yellow-pages-no-4>

#10

2022, November 21

## “Bruno Latour, Designer” by Cameron Tonkinwise

*In this issue, Cameron Tonkinwise, Professor of Design Studies at the University of Technology Sydney, reflects on the “annoyingly prolific” production of Bruno Latour and its significance for designers. With his unique cleverness, Latour drew attention to the narrative – even promotional – abilities needed to advance a scientific idea, he reflected on the morality we delegate to things, and thus invited us to take those things seriously.*



Bruno Latour reenacting 1864 Pasteur's lecture on spontaneous generation in 1999. Still from video.

## Very Clever Latour

I was only in the same room as Bruno Latour once, when he was at The New School in New York City to introduce a new degree program that he had recently launched, one that explored how “art is the politics of making that which is necessary possible.”<sup>1</sup> But I read everything he produced as it appeared in the latter half of his career. He was annoyingly prolific, and not just at writing books and articles. He staged exhibitions and performances and collaborated widely on experimental projects involving applied research; and increasingly used his international fame to platform the politics of tackling climate change. His background was not under-privileged, and for that he was initially shunned by the French academic hierarchy.<sup>2</sup> But in the end, while a charismatic front person for all these ventures, it was apparent from social media mourning, that his tendency – in ways that seem to be too rare for people of his stature – was always toward generosity and curiosity.

Not only were his texts entertaining, but also ‘clever,’ a word that means etymologically the capacity to chop things up and put them together again in novel ways. Latour did not impress with encyclopedic scholarship, and was no poet, but always managed to approach his topics by assembling surprising insights.

1. For a description of the Master en Arts Politiques, see <https://www.artandeducation.net/schoolwatch/58047/reassembling-art-pedagogy-pragmatism-inquiry-and-climate-change-at-sciencespo-experimentation-in-arts-and-politics>.

2. See Ava Kofman’s obituary which mentions Pierre Bourdieu’s proscription of Latour.

His texts often involve a kind of playing around, and this was something that annoyed a lot of 'serious' people. Latour is often disparaged as a joker, if not a joke. But there is something important in these tactics, as well as in what they were meant to highlight. To put it crudely, both the form and the content of Latour's work concern Design – which is why more designers should read more of him.

Latour never really engaged directly with Design in any comprehensive way. His focus was more Science and Technology, and then Politics and Religion. He did collaborate with visual communication designers on 'controversy mapping' amongst other projects, and with exhibition and stage designers, also in relation to urban design. The most explicit engagement Latour had with non-architectural design was when he was invited to give a keynote address at the Design History Society conference, though his reference point is primarily that of his friend Peter Sloterdijk, the prominent German philosopher who teaches at a Design School. Nevertheless, I believe Latour has very important things to say about design, even when he does not directly engage with design, and while those things are important for non-designers, they might be crucial for designers.

Latour began his academic career as a philosopher but became an anthropologist. His approach was criticized as 'descriptivist', meaning that he was always calling for "more details"<sup>3</sup> as researchers "follow the actants," that is, documenting the material artefacts that are linked up during the process being researched. There is already an important point here.

3. "A good text should trigger in a good reader this reaction: 'Please, more details, I want more details.'" in *Reassembling the Social*, p. 137.





Bruno Latour discussing a gravimeter with scientist Jacques Hinderer in the Vosges Mountains in 2018. Photo by Luca Locatelli for The New York Times.

## Knowledge Design

To shed light on this point, consider how hard managing designers is, because it is just difficult to see what they are doing. Peer into their studios and they appear to be doodling, staring out windows, moving a cursor with tiny movements of a mouse, or else chatting incoherently with colleagues while gesturing at some mess on a wall or on a table.

Somehow, out of all this mark-making and paper-pushing, wholly new things get specified and then made, things that enable people to live and work differently. Futures seem to get magically composed out the mundane material acts of designers.

Latour first achieved academic fame for his descriptions of the somewhat similar situation at work in the material practices of scientists. Science pursues Truth, but when you “follow the actants” of “laboratory life” all you see are everyday activities: cleaning and maintaining equipment, attending meetings, labelling specimens and writing up notes, etc. Latour, and his co-author Steve Woolgar, showed how those things, in the sense



of both stuff and activities, enabled a network that resulted in “coming to know” something new, some new fact or even ‘law of nature.’

The analysis was read as a deconstruction of Science, when it was rather merely an account of its construction. What was missing from the way people read those “Studies of Science” was seeing that constructing as a type of designing. If I design something, I have made it up, invented it; but then once manufactured, once bought and incorporated into a user’s everyday life, that design has become real; it has become something that that person can rely on, something that can be taken as matter of fact, a Law – at least until the product breaks. Scientific knowledge is something that is designed; there are routines – ““trials of strength”” Latour called them at one point – behind its development that ensure that that knowledge can be relied upon to do what it was designed to do – until some future breakdown.

The constructing dimension of ‘social constructivism’ can sound like a simple, instrumental exercise. If we think of it instead as a kind of designing, we can pay attention to how strategic and persistent you need to be to get something accepted. Next to the actual objective of realizing something, a secondary goal emerges that consists in having what is being developed speak for itself, stand up on its own. Latour’s history of Pasteur, for example, foregrounded not just the technical, laboratory side of his work, but Pasteur’s extensive performatively promotional work. Pasteur was incessantly ‘networking,’ in the contemporary sense of meeting people who could be allies and supporters. Much of Pasteur’s life involved designing touring demonstrations of what he was discovering, finding ways of giving voice to bacteria so that they could assert their presence, teaching people about their life cycles, capacities and weaknesses.

Latour did not just describe this in his history of Pasteur, but re-enacted Pasteur’s ‘performances,’ and then did likewise for his own insights into ecological political processes. He availed himself of every kind of means to convince people of what he was finding: a new genre of conceptual

diagrams produced on unwieldy word processing tools; books in multiple typefaces, each representing a different perspective on the development of a technology; large scale exhibitions. In this sense, Latour modelled that every researcher needs to be also be a designer, designing not just their research processes, but also their research sharing processes, the distinction between the former and the latter actually being a conceptual mistake.

The philosophy that Latour extrapolated from this description of the material (net)work that scientists undertake to design knowledge into existence, is typically clever, in the sense of reflexive. (It should be remembered that this early work on studying science scientifically [at least in the sociological sense], was necessarily reflexive, something that those involved in this nascent community of 'Sociology of Scientific Knowledge,' had a lot of fun with, playing at in-jokes to bond against the disparagement by both scientists and sociologists. <sup>4</sup>

To have a 'modern' commitment to 'scientific rationality' is to be materialist. But to worry that describing the prosaic activities of scientists designing knowledge into existence would threaten the sanctity of Science, suggested that being 'modern' actually requires a kind of faith in transubstantiation, in the capacity of scientists to have epiphanies about Truths that were completely distinct from those everyday practices. It is crucial for designers to realise that they are also involved in this kind of conundrum.

4. A good example: Malcolm Ashmore's *The Reflexive Thesis: Wrighting Sociology of Scientific Knowledge*, Chicago University Press, 1989.



Bruno Latour presenting *Making Things Public*, the exhibition he co-curated with Peter Weibel at ZKM in 2005.

## "It's Alive!"

Consider one of Latour's most instructive pieces about design, originally published with the subtitle "A Sociology of a Door-Closer." Latour makes clear the stakes of the article at the outset: "The most liberal sociologist often discriminates against nonhumans. Ready to study the most bizarre, exotic or convoluted social behavior, he or she balks at nuclear plants, robots or pills." Half-jokingly, the article is authored under a pragmatically North American pseudonym – Jim Johnson, of the "Columbus School of Mines," – rather than under the name of someone whose family runs a famous French winery. The argument of the article is clearer when expanded into a book chapter entitled "Where are the Missing Masses?" That phrase refers to the idea that there is not enough observable matter to explain how the universe holds itself gravitationally together. Latour suggests that sociology is similar; there must be some dark matter beyond conventional social phenomena – ideas, values, meanings, etc – holding society together. Those missing things are in fact: things, designed artifacts doing social work.

The article begins with a silly pun, a note on a university meeting room door that read: "The Groom is On Strike, For God's Sake, Keep the Door Closed." Latour explains that the "'groom' is FrenGLISH for [both] an automated door-closer or butler." The note draws attention to a core

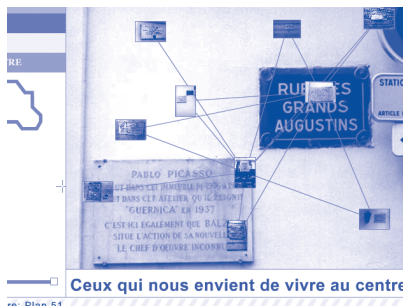
edict for Latour concerning how social researchers should think about designed products: “every time you want to know what a nonhuman [such as a thing like a door-closer] does, simply imagine what other humans or other nonhumans would have to do were this nonhuman not present.” This is a kind of ‘reverse engineering’ of the design process. Some in our societies value being draught- or noise-free, or feeling secure in certain places, enough to make a job of ensuring that doors are closed behind those that enter them (by people who often forget to do so, because they are distracted by the room they’ve entered, or were raised in places without doors). Others who value such things, might also value meaningful employment, and so try to replace a door-person with some kind of door-closer. The designer briefed with this task will research and/or imagine different kinds of users, use cases and wider contexts, in order to identify all the things that the door needs to do; and then finds ways to get the door do all those things a door-person would do.

What is significant here is not just that technologies can be understood as substitutes for human labour (or extractions of labour power into more commodifiable forms that capitalists can more easily control). It is not just about functional requirements. What motivates and guides the process is making the door more humane. The difference between design and engineering would be evident in the nature of the ‘crit’ involved in the former. At issue is not just what the door can do, but how it does those things, with what qualities. Designers would judge whether the door was being ‘rude’ by having the capacity to close, but too quickly, oblivious of those who move more slowly; or whether the door was discriminating against the less strong by requiring too much force to open (to charge the compressed air door-closer). Designers make things come to life so that they can play an acceptable part in society. This is why Latour was fond of the formulation “technology is society made durable” that any particular designed artifact is an instance of “delegated morality.” We make decisions as a community about how we want to live and then design things that can help hold those decisions in place.

This last point is the one that annoyed many people, especially those who were more into 'having heard about' than 'having actually read' Latour. The animism that emerges from his accounts of the social work of things is considered evidence that he was merely a joker. Taking Latour seriously means acknowledging the 'agency' of non-humans – and not just living things, but any thing, even, or especially, products that we humans had assembled. Machines, but even just non-mechanical objects, act; they are actants acting on us, making us act in particular ways. To many this seemed ridiculous, the sort of thing only a French theorist would say.

But the people who should not find this animism silly, are designers, since designers are the ones who give things those interactive qualities, who put that 'knowledge' of how to dynamically nudge humans, with the peril that this activity implies, into things. Latour is making clear that the essence of designing is Interaction Design, giving the forms to things that will influence, direct and prompt people to use those things in certain ways. The difference between a thing that can be used for a certain action, and a thing that invites, suggests, even demands, that it be used for those actions – in other words, a thing that has some agency over what it aims to have done with it – is design. Designing a tool – a garment, a piece of furniture, an environment, the screen of a digital app, etc – is a process of making things alive to the quirks of humans, and to what it takes to help humans into particular kinds of activities.

This is not a total power; it is not coercive. But it is a force, one that can make our built environments more careful, more full of care.



Screenshot from Paris: Invisible City, a "sociological web opera" written by Bruno Latour in 2004.

# Faith in Design

This is the serious side to Latour's work. While he can be clever, often too 'cute,' in the way he tries to alert non-design disciplines to the reality of design, the overall objective is a matter of conviction. Latour cared deeply about the worlds we sustain with the design practices underlying our scientific research and technological developments. It should have been no surprise that Latour would become a climate crisis activist. (And it should also have been no surprise that Latour remained a practicing Catholic, someone who could give a descriptivist account of the material composition of a religion without feeling that that would undermine the force of the experience so composed.)<sup>5</sup>

Latour was no saint and there are robust critiques of the work: a failure to adequately account for the role of human labour in the composition of networks, attending more to design than to the making, and then focusing more on the agency of the made than on those made to do something; a consequent downplaying of formal politics, in a way that risked boosting neoliberalism, as it encourages micropolitics rather than conventional political organizing against class or institutional power<sup>6</sup>; an occasional exoticism that appropriates the idea of "becoming Indigenous."<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, no one has more amusingly opened up other disciplines to the serious social power that designers tap into when determining how politely or rudely a door will close. And in turn, no one has more cleverly shown designers that such design decisions are also parts of networks that hold in place unsustainable ways of being modern, and that designers can and must use their diverse ways of designing to redirect how our societies are organized.

5. <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/node/4>

but more personally, <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/node/496>.

6. <https://salvage.zone/neoliberalism-for-polite-company-bruno-latours-pseudo-materialist-coup/> and <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3425-bruno-latour-occupy-earth>.

7. See David Chandler and Julien Reid's comments on Latour in their wider ranging critique, *Becoming Indigenous: Governing Imaginaries in the Anthropocene*

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